

MULTIPLE BETRAYAL AND CRISIS OF CONFIDENCE IN VIJAY TENDULKAR'S *SILENCE! THE COURT IS IN SESSION* AND MAHESH DATTANI'S *THIRTY DAYS IN SEPTEMBER*

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ABSTRACT

*Vijay Tendulkar as a naturalistic and realistic playwright revolutionizes Indian English Theatre with his raw themes and real life characters. He acquired an epithet 'The Angry Young Man' of Marathi Theatre'. His protagonists, especially females struggle a lot against hostile family and the society and experience secret physical, emotional and psychological wounds and scars. Mahesh Dattani is considered as a 'Change Element' as he opens up new horizons in Indian English Theatre. He is keen in presenting family disintegration, internal dilemmas and societal conflicts, sexuality and gender issues including taboo subjects in his plays. Family is the arena for both Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Dattani. Strong families make strong societies. This article throws light on the multiple betrayals and loss of confidence among the family members and how it results in dehumanization of people and in turn destabilization of the society. Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court in Session* (1967) and Mahesh Dattani's *Thirty days in September* (2001) discuss the taboo of incest and child sex abuse - ruptured males and ruptured families. Leela Benare in *Silence! The Court in Session* and Mala and her mother Shanta in *Thirty Days in September* suffer the trauma of child sex abuse, incest, multiple betrayals and untold turmoils and they swim against the current. The Victims suffer suffocation in their fight against the betrayals, in their reaction against traditionally set pattern of family and society. Families constitute the society and the crisis in the family affect the very fabric of the society and vice versa. Treading in the lines of Ibsen and Shaw both present middle class urban society and family. Both highlight the diminishing Indian family values and the hollowness of Indian society. Both have portrayed what they witnessed and experienced as they are. The techniques 'play within the play' in *Silence! The Court in Session* and the 'flash back technique' in *Thirty days in September* brilliantly convey the magnitude of this distressing problem that demands to be addressed immediately.*

KEYWORDS: Patriarchy, Disintegrated Families, Betrayal, Incest, Child Sex Abuse, Trauma & Moral crisis

Received: Oct 17, 2016; **Accepted:** Nov 01, 2016; **Published:** Nov 18, 2016; **Paper Id.:** IJELDEC20166

INTRODUCTION

In today's world, virtually everyone's trust has been betrayed at one time or another. Betrayal and loss of confidence happens between mother and child; husband and wife; between blood relations; between teacher and student; between employer and employee etc., which makes one to ask oneself, is there anyone I can trust?

World becomes turbulent with the tides of dishonesty and betrayal as numerous forms of exploitation are widespread in the world. The vocabularies like honesty, integrity, trust, confidence lose their genuine meaning in this contemporary world.

Experiments conducted by Michael Kosfeld, a Professor of Business Administration at Frankfurt University in Germany, led him to the discovery that,

Trust is “a biologically-based part of human nature”. when there is interaction between two people, the human brain releases oxytocin, a hormone that stimulates trust. “It is, in fact, one of the distinguishing features of the human species”, “When trust is absent, we are, in a sense, dehumanized”.

The family is the oldest institution on the earth and plays a vital role in human society. Strong families makes strong societies. A happy family is a haven which provides safety and security for women and children. An ideal family assures care, love, trust and confidence to the children and they feel safe, however perilous the outside world is. Children develop moral boundaries and sense of personal worth and learn the meaning of love and trust by bonding with their parents. If the abuser is a trusted parent, the child is devastated.

Now the families are in crisis with the increasing rate of divorce and many have lost their belief in marriage and prefer to live together without marriage. The traditional family eco system no longer exists. Reports from around the world tell of millions of children wander parentless, homeless and loveless.

There are two main reasons for family crisis, one is Intra-Familial: where the problems arise within the family, in the inter-personal relationships. For example, both the parents working, pre-marital relationships, illegal pregnancy and abortion, extra marital affairs and alcoholism, deserted wives, and abandoned children. The another is Extra-Familial: where the problems are beyond the control of an individual family. For example, economic depression, civil wars, natural calamities, endemic and pandemic diseases.

Whatever may be the reason the family crisis poses a great threat to the family organization and its form and structure and ultimately threat the society. Such crisis has short or long time effects upon the family and the society. Family harmony provides a sense of confidence, trust, belonging and feeling of security. Disharmony results in negative emotions and negative consequences.

India is basically a patriarchal society, where gender, cultural norms and social structure suffocate women and they find themselves continuously betrayed not only by the societal values but by their own family – mother, father, brother etc., Their life becomes a lifelong trial and they experience bitterness and frustration in their fight against the multiple betrayal and confidence crisis. Men continued to rule the homes and societies but unjustly,

The most hateful aristocracy ever established on the face of the globe.... This oligarchy of sex which makes father, brother, husband, sons the oligarchies over the mother and sister, the wife and daughter of every household, which ordains all men sovereigns and all women subjects, carries dissension, discard and rebellion into every home of the nation.

Says, Susan B. Anthony who devoted herself to the cause of women's rights in the late eighteenth century in the campaign for female suffrage in New York.

In Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session* (1967) the protagonist Leela Benare faces multiple betrayals and she cannot trust anyone around her. Accused of illegal pregnancy, she is forced to abort the offspring. The society blames only her as sinful and not the man who caused her suffering.

This play is based on the real incident as Tendulkar was motivated from an amateur group of players on its way to stage a mock trial in Vile Purlie, the suburb where Tendulkar lived. Tendulkar portrays a grave social problem of unmarried motherhood and the hostile attitude of the male dominated Indian society. The protagonist Leela Benare is a school teacher by profession and she is forced to reveal the dark secrets of her life by a brilliant dramatic technique, the play within the play, setting up a trial scene in the court. In the mock trial, she involuntarily reveals how she faced multiple betrayals and multiple exploitation. Benare when she was 14 years old was seduced by her own maternal uncle. She feels guilty and says: "It is true, I did commit a sin. I was in love with my mother's brother" (3.117). She continues,

He praised by bloom every day. He gave me love If you felt that just being with him gave a whole meaning to life and if he was your uncle, it was a sin! Why? I was hardly fourteen! I didn't even know what sin was – I swear by my mother.... and my brave man turned tail and ran. (3.117).

Leela Benare's mother has no voice against this atrocity as she is bound in tradition. One can imagine how it would be difficult for a teen to come out of this emotional betrayal but she manages to emerge as a successful teacher, and dedicates herself to the cause of education of the children. There again she faces betrayal from Professor Damle, her employer.

Benare in her quest for true love falls victim to her maternal uncle and later as a 34 year old woman to Professor Damle:

Again I fell in love. As a grown woman. I threw all my heart into it; I thought this will be different, this love is intelligent... It isn't love at all – its worship. But it was the same mistake. I offered up my body on the alter of my worship. And my intellectual God took the offering – and went his way. He wasn't a God. He was a man for whom everything was of the body, for the body. That's all, again the body!. (3.118)

Life becomes burdensome when the society blames only the females. She cannot even turn to her mother for help or any other in the society. Some victims have destructive feelings on them "I hated my body because it had responded to the stimulation of the abuser" admits Reba, in one case study. Leela Benare too feels the same. She calls the sexual urge in her as a "traitor". She musters up courage and wants to live only for her child, and says "My own existence, I want my body now for him, for him alone". (She shuts her eyes and mutters in mortal pain). 'He must have a mother... a father to call his own –a house – to be looked after -he must have a good name (3.118).

The people who are in the position to guard her, offer safety and security exploit her. In Marathi culture, the place of maternal uncle is of immense cultural importance because during the marriage ceremony, the 'Kanyadan' is usually performed by the maternal uncle. His place is next to father. If he betrays her and if her mother hides that, where else would the teen go for her rescue? If her employer preys upon her, where else would she go? Erosion of family values is clearly portrayed in this play.

A survey shows that most victims are girl children molested by their biological fathers and step fathers. Abuse takes place at the hands of older siblings, uncles, grand fathers and adult acquaintances. Dr.J.Patric Gannon, a clinical performance psychologist in San Francisco and San Rafael explains that when children face sexual abuse, the process of trust building gets derailed. The abuser betrays the child's trust, robs her of any semblance of safety, privacy and self respect and uses her as an object of self gratification.

Mahesh Dattani's *Thirty Days in September* (2001) paces with *Silence! The Court is in Session* (1967) in its heart rendering delineation of child sex abuse. The play was commissioned by a Delhi based institution RAHI (Recovering and Healing from Incest) which came into existence in 1996 to help and support the adult women survivors, who fell prey to the beastly instinct of their own kith and kin. Having agreed to the request of RAHI to write a play on this subject, Mahesh Dattani interviewed more than half a dozen victims and worked on 12 case histories and wrote this touching play.

Thirty Days in September is more powerful and poignant than *Silence! The Court is in Session*, in its portrayal of agony, wounded self and sexual trauma of the protagonist Mala. Mala when she was seven years old, was molested repeatedly by her own maternal uncle, Vinay, whenever he visits them or they visit him during her summer vacation. Mala is desperate when she finds her mother not paying attention to her trauma, despite her repeated attempts. Her mother's deaf ear, blind eye, silent heart and numb mind is so unnatural to Mala and as well to the audience. Shanta fails to be a confidant of Mala. This emotional alienation agonizes her more than the pain of the sexual abuse of her uncle. The mother simply prays to Lord Krishna and Mala in her outrage picks up the glass framed portrait of Lord Krishna and flings into pieces.

Her hatred towards her mother keeps increasing and hence she blames her for failing to safeguard her, for failing to offer motherly love and doing her duty. This is evident in these lines

Mala (to Shanta). where were you when he locked the door to your bedroom while I was napping in there? Where were you during those fifteen minutes when he was destroying my soul? Fifteen minutes every day of my summer holidays, add them up. Fifteen minutes multiplied by thirty or thirty one or whatever that is how long or how little it took for you to send me to hell for the rest of my life. Surely you must have known, Ma (3.53)".

Child sex abuse is an overwhelming, damaging and humiliating assault on a child's body, mind, and soul, and thus been called "the ultimate betrayal". Mala pours out her anguish - "... If only you had looked into my eyes and seen the hurt or asked me 'beta what's wrong?' Then may be, I would have told you" (3.53). She accuses her mother for not observing her and questioning her. She has lost all her confidence in her mother "I knew... you will never ask me that question. Because you already knew the answer (3.53).

The victims of child sex abuse may develop compulsive immoral desires. "I led a promiscuous life and would end up having sexual relations with complete strangers"- admits Jill, as per one case history. It is true with Mala too. Mala's frustration transforms her into a negative personality and her sexual perversion is a result of repeated molestation faced by her. She keeps a calendar that she changes men once in thirty days and before they discard her, she discards them. In this way she wants to take revenge on the menfolk. She finds her own way of survival as no one comes to her rescue not even her mother.

Mother is the one who could understand the feelings of the children before they express. Here, Mala finds her mother deliberately avoiding, listening to her. Mala does not find a shoulder to cry, a rescuer to rely on, not a person to share her emotional wounds. Mala's mother Shanta admits her grave fault "Yes Yes! I only remained silent I am to blame" (3.54) and tries to justify her silence "how could I save her when I could not save myself" (3.55).

Shanta outbursts her own pain and agony which freezes Mala, Deepak and the audience “I was six Mala, I was six and he was thirteen and it wasn’t only in summer holidays, for ten years! for ten years!... I can’t shout for help” (3.55) She reaches the state of numbness where neither pain nor pleasure affects her. It is as if she reaches a state of nirvana that nothing affects her.

Mala feels worthless, she neither loves anyone nor is ready to receive love from anyone, as she believes that no love is true. The therapist says to Deepak “All she needs is some love and attention and she will be fine” (2.49). The psychologically affected Mala says to Deepak, that she sees her abuser everywhere. When Shanta pleads her to go with Deepak to learn love and learn to forget, Mala says,

Mala: By staying silent doesn’t mean I can forget! This is my hell. This hell is where I belong! It is your creation, Ma! You created it for me. With your silence! You didn’t forget anything, you only remained silent (3.54).

Mother is a first one who comes to the rescue of a child and here Shanta remains dump, numb, deaf and blind. May be in her extreme frustration she fails in her duty. Shanta in turn is deserted by her husband and Mala blames her mother for that. The father left them for another woman and she has not seen him for fifteen years. She tells “He left because of you. You did not love him. The only reason you shared my room was because you didn’t want to sleep with him” (2.36). This shows another side of Shanta that she could not engage herself in sexual life with her husband because of the trauma that she experienced in her childhood. A case history mentioned in *Awake* (8th October 1991) says the victims show symptoms of inability to enjoy marital intimacies. Linda confesses: “I find the sexual side of marriage to be the hardest thing in my life. I get the most dreadful sensation that it is my father there and I get panicky.” Mala’s mother Shanta in *Thirty Days in September*, too would have experienced similar feeling and her husband would have left her, because of that. Mala’s words to her mother ‘you didn’t want to sleep with him’ confirms this.

In the final Act, Shanta in her utter despair, picks up one of the glass pieces of the broken portrait of Lord Krishna and jabs it in her mouth, punishes herself for not saving her child. Shanta’s last minute disclosure of her own trauma makes Mala’s heart melt and Mala says, “It’s not your fault, mother. Just as it wasn’t my fault. Please tell me that you have forgiven me for blaming you. Please tell me that” (3.58).

Leela Benare in *Silence! The Court is in Session*, and Mala in *Thirty Days in September* – both face multiple betrayal and loss of confidence. Both are seduced by their own maternal uncle and lost their childhood.

The mothers of both could not come to their rescue as they are traditionally bound and want to hide the truth. The mothers are helpless as they themselves faced betrayal from their husbands and no one helped them. They are weak, meek, docile and afraid to raise voice against any wrong. Both the families are single parent family. Shanta cannot stop her brother from ruining her daughter’s life as she relies on him for her survival and also to bring up her child and is compelled to accept the financial aid offered by her brother and allows him to prey upon her own daughter. Shanta prays to Lord Krishna and throws her burden on him and believes that god alone can put an end to their suffering.

A case study in the research magazine “*Awake*”(1991) says that the consequence of the child sex abuse depends on child’s relationship to the abuser, severity of the abuse, the duration of abuse, the child’s age and other factors. Many victims suffer deep emotional wounds.

Leela Benare is able to recover, can defend herself and attack the male dominated society. She is able to reconcile, but for Mala, it is very difficult because she was repeatedly abused, that too for a long time. So it took long time for Mala to come out of her trauma, haunting memories, tormenting emotions. Shanta and Mala consider themselves as emotionless and lifeless vegetables and are immune to all feelings.

Sexually abused victims suffer an array of symptoms: depression, guilt, shame, rage, emotional, shutdown, low self-esteem and powerlessness. Sally recalls “each time he molested me, I felt powerless, frozen, numb, stiff and confused”- as per a case study (Awake, 1991).

Leela Benare has not become a negative character though there is no one to help her. Life becomes a lifelong trial to her. But Mala turns to be a sexual addict and wants to take revenge on the male and not mature enough to understand that she causes her own ruin.

Victims may also have difficulty in maintaining healthy relationships. Some may not relate to men, some may sabotage friendships and marriages and some may avoid close relationships. It is true with Mala too. Though Deepak comes to Mala’s rescue, she is not willing to accept the true love of Deepak initially. But after four years of counselling, she is able to come out of self-pity and self-doubt and able to come back to normal. Happily married to Deepak, she realizes that it was not her fault. “After all it is he who must hide, he should change his name, not me” (1.8).

Both Leela Benare and Mala do not have moral compass. Wherever they turn they face betrayal and they cannot put their trust and confidence on anyone. Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Dattani convey that the parents should be moral compass for their children.

No other writer brings home the horror and pain of incest and child sex abuse, so powerfully than Mahesh Dattani in the history of Indian English Drama. The play touches the heart and conscience of everyone who reads it and pricks the conscience of the society too. He urges the audience and the society that something should be done urgently to stop such atrocities.

Both Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Dattani are unafraid to raise taboo subjects in these plays. Cases of incest largely go unreported because of prestige issue. There are thousands of Leela Benares, Malas and Shantas who are desperately in need of help and these two dramatists did a commendable job. Both the plays exhibit incomparable social relevance. The families are stripped off, the society is ripped off. Both convey how such confident crisis and the family crisis dehumanize the people and destabilize the society.

Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Dattani serve as Messiah of middle class society, and are resolute in their strong voice against social ills, the double standards of the people and the hypocrisy and superficiality of the society.

Both depict disintegrated families, diseased societies and the moral corruption prevalent in the so called culturally rich country – India. Karnad was culture shocked when he says in *Wedding Album*, “unlike US, India has an ancient civilization. A culture which is full of wisdom, insight. India should have the capacity to lead the world. Yet when I looked back at my country what did I see? Again darkness!” (8.81).

Karnad also is very daring in his attack on the relationship crisis, the family crisis and the moral crisis. Aswin the protagonist in *Wedding Album* says, “I am passing through a spiritual crisis” (8.79).

The most insidious effect of child sex abuse is the potential spiritual damage. The book "Facing Codependence" by Pia Mellody says child sex abuse "is also spiritual abuse, because it taints the child's trust of a higher power". Yes it is difficult for the victims to believe in God.

Women eternally suffer in the patriarchal society, which eternally provide themes to majority of the writers and writings. Still in 2016 Susan B. Anthony's words are relevant "The only question left to be settled, now is: Are women persons!" So when it will be settled?

COCLUSIONS

'The Angry Young Man' Vijay Tendulkar (who is no more but lives still and forever by his writings) and Mahesh Dattani, (the living writer) 'the Change Element' in the history of Indian English drama can change the society with their pen. They really prove to be so and can change the state of girl children and women, can build strong family relationships and strong society- change the demons into humans and angels, with their pen, yes, with their leaking pen as they leak out stark truths and dark secrets. Yes "pen is mightier than sword" says Edward Bulwerlytton. It is appropriate to conclude with Malala's words "One pen and one book can change the world".

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